

Cara M. Arver

Are You Willing to Have Your Students Join Ralph, Jack, and Piggy?

High school teacher Cara M. Arver walks teachers through her experience of setting up a virtual world to augment students' reading of *Lord of the Flies*. Students interact as additional characters, discuss and solve problems based on the circumstances of the story, and complete classroom assignments within a virtual environment.

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ith the rapid development of new technologies, terms such as *virtual reality* and *virtual worlds* are getting more attention, both from players of the new video games and from serious learning activities pioneered at major universities such as MIT and Harvard. The online world *Second Life*, for example, has gained such significance that the *New York Times* recently reported it is permanently stationing a reporter in that virtual space. Unfortunately, many of these virtual experiences, while of great potential interest to secondary students, are still unavailable to them. As much as they love video games and computer simulations, students under eighteen typically have been prohibited from participating in virtual worlds with research or academic purposes. In addition, many school computers have been unable to handle the complex technical demands of the advanced programming. However, it can be valuable for secondary students to become engaged in virtual worlds as they study literature. These virtual worlds constitute an interactive form of textuality with rich possibilities for curriculum and instruction.

As a high school English teacher, I worked with a group of university literature professors to design a collection of free, open-source, virtual worlds for literary study at the secondary and college levels. These virtual worlds use an older technology that is more accessible in schools and prefigures the new worlds that have emerged in immersive technology and literary study. In

"Falling into Story: Teaching Reading with the Literary MOO," Robert Rozema describes this technology as a "text-based virtual environment, a sort of sophisticated chat room complete with its own architecture and interconnected rooms, stockpile of manipulable objects, and cast of interesting characters" (33). The virtual worlds we have designed have strong visual elements that are historically and culturally related to specific literary texts, from those of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens to Virginia Woolf and Chinua Achebe. They can incorporate sound and video files to create museum and role-play environments.

I was skeptical the first time I ventured into a virtual world, but I was intrigued enough to take a closer look. I consider myself a technologically backward English teacher, but in a graduate English education methods class with Allen Webb, I learned about literature and technology. We discussed, used, and created literature archives, online journals, and Webquests, and I even developed a teaching Web site. All of this helped me become more proficient in using technology. Then, during one class period, Rozema, one of Webb's former students, joined us in the virtual world—or MOO, as we were initially taught to call it (for an explanation, see the sidebar)—that he had created for his students to experience Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. My classmates, all experienced literature teachers but not technology geeks, had a blast exploring his literature-oriented world where players ventured into different rooms that Rozema had

created, all based on the rich details Huxley offers in the first three chapters of the novel (34). We had character names and identities; ate too much soma, “the wonder drug of the World State” (35); and were denied access to restricted areas because of our identities.

Yet, I was still doubtful as to what benefit a literary virtual world experience could have in the secondary English classroom. Where would I be able to use one and what benefits would it provide? My ninth graders during the 2003–04 school year showed me the answers. This was a class of loud, belligerent, unmotivated, funny young men and a

smattering of shy girls. I needed to focus their abundant energy, and I was also concerned with the achievement level of the boys in my English classes—our state testing scores showed that the boys were lagging behind in the language arts. Armed with my brief experience in a literary virtual world, I began an independent study with Webb and Rozema to create a virtual world. I hoped to use

the students’ interest in technology to inspire them to delve into the literature that we were reading. I wanted students to get “stuck in the middle of a tale” (Rozema 33). I wanted to help students hone their skills in reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and sharing. Types of technology address different learning styles and comprehension skills and also give students the tools to create associations with the curriculum. A technologically enhanced interactive setting would appeal to active young men in the classroom, and I hoped it could encourage even resistant ninth graders to move beyond traditional interactions with the literature they read.

Building a World

I began teaching myself by reading chapters from *High Wired: On the Design, Use, and Theory of Educational MOOs* (Haynes and Holmevik). The most useful chapter, “MOO Educational Tools,” helped me work through various tasks: making “rooms,” creating objects, writing on the virtual blackboard,

modifying my online virtual-reality environment, accessing the Internet from the virtual world, and creating “bots,” interactive robot characters within the environment. I learned to program the bots to respond to keywords and correspond with the other “inhabitants” of the virtual world. (See the sidebar for explanations and definitions of some of these objects, commands, and navigational systems.)

I called my homepage within this virtual world “Mrs. Arver’s Classroom.” Within the classroom, default “furniture” appeared: a desk, table, and blackboard. Other objects, including multimedia educational objects such as a Web projector, recitable note, or slide projector, can be added to the environment as well (see sidebar). My favorite object was the virtual blackboard. Any participant or visitor can read and write on the blackboard within a classroom, and this is where I posted most of my assignments.

When I created my homepage, I used specific commands such as “@dig west, w to Math Classroom” to build the rooms and links I wanted. This was tedious and time consuming. In the new software version we are using, creating virtual spaces is considerably easier. Now, a few keystrokes and mouse clicks can do most of the building. My homepage was originally housed on a virtual world homepage called “Secondary Worlds,” created and maintained by Rozema. It has since been moved to an updated site called Literary Worlds (<http://literaryworlds.org>). Webb, Rozema, and a team of literature professors at Western Michigan University designed this site for virtual worlds created by secondary and university literature teachers. There students can enter into the virtual-reality worlds of many commonly taught texts. The worlds range from the “Village of Umuofia” based on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to “Midsummer Madness” based on Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Other texts with virtual worlds that secondary students and teachers can freely access include *Of Mice and Men*, *Native Son*, *The Tempest*, *Moll Flanders*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and others. This site contains many resources and links to other literary virtual worlds for those who don’t wish to spend the time creating one.

There are several things to consider when creating a virtual environment around a piece of literature. A strong setting is one of the most

However, it can be valuable for secondary students to become engaged in virtual worlds as they study literature. These virtual worlds constitute an interactive form of textuality with rich possibilities for curriculum and instruction.

important considerations. The world I created was based on William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* because the setting of the book is integral to the plot. The setting fosters and sustains the conflicts that arise for the boys in the story. Additionally, the island is like a character in itself; it has vivid features such as ethereal beaches, steamy jungles, and a broad mountaintop. Having these varied environments helped me envision my rooms for the virtual environment.

The setting isn't the only important part of the novel. The boys are thousands of miles from a civilization that may not exist anymore, with no authority figure to tell them how to behave. As in the popular television series *Lost*, the characters slowly sense civilization slip away as their civility toward each other is affected by time, distance, and the cruel realities of survival. I wanted discussion of these issues to come about naturally as the students entered the virtual-reality setting online.

Another reason I chose *Lord of the Flies* was that the characters in it are appealing. Every reader can connect with at least one of the characters, whether they feel sympathy for Piggy, pride in Ralph for his determination, or anger toward Jack and his heavy-handed ways. I could easily see students in this group of ninth graders "becoming" one boy or another on the island in a virtual-reality world. They could maintain individuality but would still have restrictions placed on their interactions based on their characters, circumstances, and setting.

I linked the *Lord of the Flies* Room to Mrs. Arver's Classroom. From there, I created subrooms for students and experimented with placing images, such as one I chose for the island itself, "roughly boat-shaped: humped near this end with behind them the jumbled descent to the shore" (Golding 29). I spent hours getting images to become visible and trying to program my bots to "talk." I wanted students to be able to "eat" from the fruit bowl I created, but that was a technological feat I couldn't achieve. I also linked resources from the World Wide Web to the subrooms. For example, I connected a "generic thing" named Author William Golding to a Web address where students could read information about the author. Many other objects are available within the virtual world, and I hope to integrate them into my site as my designing skills develop (see sidebar).

Frequently frustrated and overwhelmed, there were times when I felt like giving up. I recommend that teachers who seek to create literary virtual environments for their students research them and talk to other teachers who have developed and used one. Through these frustrating times, Robert Rozema was supportive. He was there the first time I used the virtual world in my classroom and students enjoyed "meeting" him in virtual space. He had ideas to support the concept of the *Lord of the Flies* virtual environment, helped me come up with meaningful assignments, and helped me with my online classroom management.

Entering the Virtual World

Rozema helped me create enough student characters for every student in my second-block class. Each student needed a user/login name and password to enter. Once in, they changed their login name, became a character from the novel, and began to describe their characters. They chose their names and descriptions, but they all had to be English schoolboys, ranging from five to thirteen years old. They interacted with each other within the virtual environment, as they would in a chatroom or "electronic book club" (Rozema 38). Some of their character descriptions include the following:

A brown haired, medium height boy—can be quiet sometimes. His name is Logan. He is someone that is pretty quiet and he doesn't get any attention and doesn't get respected for anything. Most people, when they hear of Logan, they don't know anything about him. He doesn't get counted to do anything—he is pretty much an outsider.

Jabob is short, strong, very fast, good at building huts, and good at inventing new and better designs for huts.

To further organize our entry into the virtual world, I divided the class into five groups of three or four students: the Hut Builders, the Firebuilders, Hunters, Littleuns, and Food/Fruit Finders. I grouped students with at least one member who would act as leader. Together they created a description of their meeting place, relevant and appropriate to their assigned role on the island. This encouraged students to think about the island, its appearance, and their role there. The group interactions taught

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH AN ONLINE VIRTUAL WORLD

MOO stands for MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, Domain or Dimension) Object Oriented, and is defined as a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users are connected at the same time. When you become a virtual-world creator, you are essentially the manager of your online world.

When you log into <http://literaryworlds.org>, you see a split screen. The left side is a dialogue box as you would see in any chat room. It describes the room you are in and what the participants are saying and doing. On the right, you see two columns. Below "You see:" you have a list of participants that are in the room and objects that have been created. "Links:" gives you portals to the different places you can visit within this virtual world. At the top, you have a toolbar with buttons that help you manage your site.

About tells you the important information about this literary virtual world (license information, server, and so on).

Look shows you where you can go within this virtual world. The left-hand side of the screen also provides a brief description of the different rooms and areas.

Who tells you who has logged on, where they are, and for how long. This is an important tool to help teachers keep track of where the students are.

My Stuff shows all of the objects you have created, what actions you can take with each, and how much space you have used (your quota).

Mail gives you a way to communicate within the virtual world.

Objects leads you into the Xpress Object Editor, where you can create new objects, such as rooms, slide projectors, bots, handouts, and links to the

Internet. It also shows you what objects you have already created and how to edit them. Some of the options include renaming the objects, sharing them, and editing a description. It is much easier than it used to be. For example, my object "Author William Golding" had a bad URL, so it was an easy fix within the Xpress Objects Editor.

Some of these buttons are available to guests and to students when they log in. Students/participants are not given the same rights as the creators or managers of a virtual world, but they still have a split screen and can move around within the virtual world and interact with the objects, furniture, and bots.

Additional Information

Bots are virtual characters. They can be easily programmed with the Objects button on the toolbar to respond to other characters. This can be fun, especially if the bots you create are important characters and if they have strong personalities. Bots can be easily "activated" and "hushed."

The Furniture within a room adds authenticity to the different parts of your virtual world.

If you click on **the Lightbulb**, which is standard in each of the rooms and for each of the objects, it tells you, "Here are some of the things you can do with this object. Type the obvious verbs shown here into the Xpress talk area. The word 'anything' should be substituted for a valid object name."

If you click on any object or participant's **icon** on the right side of the screen under "You See," you will get a description of that participant/object or a link to its Web site.

both independence and group cooperation. Students became participants in creating the virtual-reality environment where they would role-play and discuss the events of the novel. The following are some of the meeting-place descriptions:

The location of the hut builder's meeting place is next to the woods so we can get lumber easily. We build the huts on the beach. The materials we use are dead trees. We also use the creepers to keep the wood together as we build it. Moss is also good to fill in some of the cracks to keep the wind out. We can only build one hut a day because it takes a long time to collect the supplies.

We meet at the top of the mountain by the fire. There are a lot of logs piled up on both sides of the fire. Piggy's glasses will be laying to the left of the fire (when he's not using them). There is a coconut full of water on each side of the fire just in case.

Creating their meeting-place descriptions also led students to think about materials, problem solving, and the realities faced by the boys in the novel. Their rooms became their home base, and students met there with their cohorts to decide on a plan of action, including how to complete specific tasks that I assigned.

When we entered into the *Lord of the Flies* virtual world, I had specific goals and outcomes in mind. If I wanted students to practice vocabulary, for example, I made sure they had time to have conversations within their groups using the vocabulary words correctly. Group meetings allowed students to share information and establish positive group dynamics. After the students had acclimated themselves to the virtual environment, created their personas, and bonded as a group, they found their assignments on the blackboard in my virtual classroom.

One day the students had a conversation assignment in which they had to remain in character, using the weekly vocabulary words from the novel. Next, they were asked to write poems about the characters and events on the island. Students created personal “Notebooks” where they could write and post their poems in the virtual world. After they created their notebooks, they “dropped” them into a “Box” in Mrs. Arver’s Classroom. This assignment worked well; students enjoyed the creativity of the notebooks and used their knowledge of the characters to craft poetic homage to them. The notebooks also allowed them to experiment with the tools in the virtual world. Visitors to the world can read some of the students’ poetry in the Box in my virtual room. (To visit the world, go to <http://literaryworlds.org>, go to Enter, go to Direct Portal Entrance, log in as a “guest”—no password needed—and from Cafe go to *Lord of the Flies*.)

Rozema stated that he had to be the “police officer” within his virtual world to begin with (36). I had the same problem. Rozema and I herded wayward students who strayed from Mrs. Arver’s Classroom and the *Lord of the Flies* room back to their assigned rooms. Sometimes we found students in the Literary Worlds Cafe drinking coffee concoctions and eating sandwiches. After we realized what we were up against, Rozema redirected the group members into their specific meeting rooms and “locked” the doors behind them to discourage those who were curious and wandering. Once students realized that the *Lord of the Flies* virtual world wasn’t just for play, most of them settled down and worked together. Because of one recent change at the Literary Worlds site, students can now send email transcripts of their activities and conversations in the virtual world to themselves and their teacher. Some virtual-world designers report that this feature has reduced goofing around.

During this *Lord of the Flies* unit, practically every student came into my classroom asking, “Do we get the computers today? Are we going to work in the MOO?” I had never seen these students so excited about class work. Many of the less vocal students, those who rarely contributed during class discussion, were less intimidated within this online environment. In character it seemed that they could be more open with their opinions and reflections.

Evaluating the Experience

After we finished *Lord of the Flies*, students reflected on the experience in their journals. One student stated, “The MOO was cool. I was a hut builder and our group really got along well. We had some good ideas on how to build the huts. While in our room we talked about what was going on in the book and why the people were doing what they were doing. We didn’t like Piggy, but respected him and we liked Ralph and hated Jack. We also talked about what makes a good leader and discussed why we would make good leaders.” Another student said, “I’ve never done anything like this before. . . . I was excited to come to class to see what else we could do in the virtual world. It was really confusing at first but it’s just like a chat room but for books. I liked pretending to be a boy on a deserted island and figuring out how to survive and deal with problems.”

So what does a virtual online environment allow that traditional role-playing does not? It has several advantages. The experience enhances students’ knowledge of online virtual environments without exposing them to violence or predators. It allows students who are reserved in a traditional classroom to break out of their normal boundaries and interact differently. Students can communicate without being nervous or intimidated by face-to-face contact. In addition, when my ninth-grade students ventured into this online world, they remembered their experience there with the book, more than if we just had discussions, questions, and vocabulary in a conventional fashion. The virtual world opened up new ways to work together as a class and a team. Inevitably, students drew connections between their lives and those of the characters they read about.

A virtual-world activity combines writing and role-play in a visually rich, text-based environment that leads to higher-order thinking and new perspectives. An online virtual world allows students to

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go beyond writing essays; they enter imaginatively into the characters. Rozema called these virtual worlds an “electronic book club that meets within the story world of the book itself and invites all to participate on equal footing” (38). My students experienced our virtual world as a forum to connect with the story on their level.

I had several false starts when building my virtual world, and there are several things that I want to do to make it more enjoyable in the future. Technology can be overwhelming, but we can’t be intimidated by it. It’s easy to say, “I don’t know how to do that” or “There are just too many options,” but if we don’t start learning now, we’ll be left behind. I’m a perfect example of this timidity when it comes to technology; I am still surprised when I manage not to fry any computers or, in this case, crash the entire Literary Worlds homepage. But I overcame my fears and apprehension, one step at a time.

I will continue to use the literary virtual environment I created in my classroom, and I am going to keep improving it. It takes some time and patience, but it’s a worthwhile venture. To get a feel for what a virtual world can do, visit <http://literaryworlds.org>. You may log in as a guest. If you become interested in building a world in this space, contact Allen Webb at allen.webb@wmich.edu. If you like what you see and are interested in using the virtual world I created for *Lord of the Flies*, feel free to email me at caraarver@aol.com.

Works Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Arver built a literary world in which students could experience and discuss *Lord of the Flies*. “Paying Attention to Technology: Exploring a Fictional Technology” asks students to complete a short survey to establish their beliefs about technology. Then, students compare their opinions to the ideas in a novel that depicts technology (such as *1984*, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *REM World*, or *Feed*). Students are urged to think more deeply about their beliefs and to pay attention to the ways that technology is described and used. This lesson plan can also be completed with short stories, video games, films, and other fictional resources that examine issues related to science and technology and their possible effects on society. Students can use this newfound knowledge as they participate in virtual worlds. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=323

EJ 5 Years Ago

Remember What’s Central to Teaching English

Let’s remember this. Amid our reading strategies and thematic units and essay testing and advanced placement classes and canonical readings and transcultural literature . . . let’s remember that the reason for it all is life—the characters’ lives, the authors’ lives, our students’, our own.

Tom Romano. “Living Literature.” *EJ* 91.3 (2002): 16–17.